

Department of Fire Services

Special Operations



2003 Annual Report

Introduction

This is the first annual report of the Department of Fire Services, Special Operations section, (formally the Incident Support Unit) and reflects operations for the calendar year 2003. Special Operations incorporates the Incident Support Unit, Incident Support Trailer, and Rehab services.

During the summer of 2003 Special Operations took delivery of the Incident Support Trailer (IST). The trailer, like the ISU, is self-supporting and includes a small operations/communications area complete with mobile radios programmed with all fire departments and some state agencies within the Commonwealth. The trailer is unique to the ISU with its 40-foot antenna tower to enhance communications in difficult areas and terrains. The trailer was put into full service while the ISU was out for nearly two months for a technology upgrade.

In late summer the Incident Support Unit was taken out of service and was sent for an upgrade of technology and reconfiguration of some items for more productive use. Some of the technology added were digital radios, a flat screen monitor with a “smart Board”, new computers, a satellite system for internet access as well as direct TV, a reconfigured conference table, and a JPS switch to allow for interoperability of radio channels.

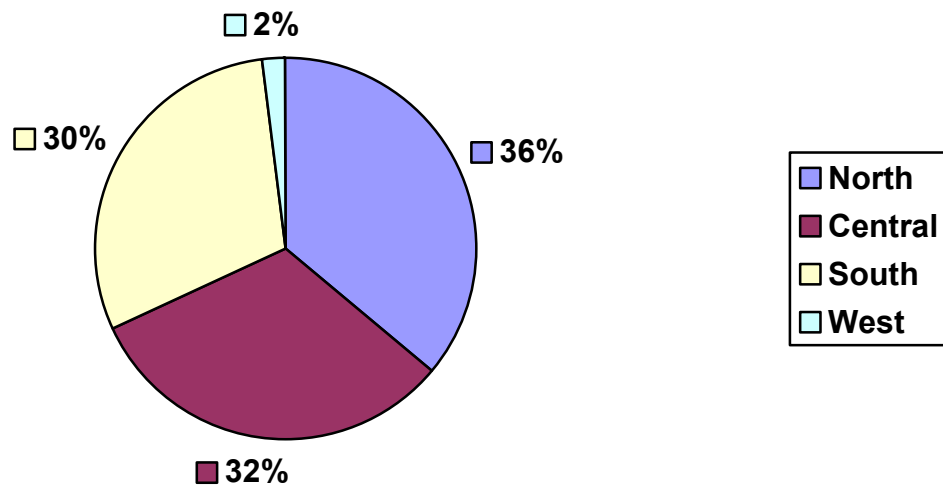
Also during the year specifications were drafted for a new REHAB vehicle to improve on services presently available on the bus. The vehicle will be designed to offer greater comfort and operational flexibility once set up on scene; it will be built on a commercial cab and chassis and will have greater response capacity.

Mission Statement

To promote and deliver exceptional operational support to the operations of the fire service within the Commonwealth of Massachusetts by providing professional, efficient, high quality support services to the local Incident Commander in a timely and proactive manner.

Responses

The Special Operations Response Team and vehicles have had a very active and productive year. Much was learned from the many responses, and changes have been made to policy, procedures, and equipment as a result. The teams were activated a total of 47 times during the year, working in 18 communities within the Commonwealth. For the first time, the team responded to an out-of-state request in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, for a general alarm blaze. The teams responded to all regions of the state in all types of weather, including some of the warmest and coldest days seen in New England in a long time. The chart below reflects the activations to the four ISU team response zones.



Operations & Liaison Chiefs

Two of the key components of the Special Operations Response Team are the Operations Chiefs and the Liaison Chiefs.

Operations Chiefs are chiefs who work for and represent the State Fire Marshal at incidents to which the unit has been deployed. Their role is to direct and facilitate Special Operations as needed by the local Incident Commander. These chiefs have been selected to represent the three ISU response districts.

Liaison Chiefs serve as the liaison between the local Incident Commander and the Special Operations Response Team. The Liaison Chiefs have had the opportunity to meet and go over expected roles and responsibilities at training sessions. Each fire district has the responsibility to choose Liaison Chiefs to fill this important role. One of the improvements made during the year is the notification process for Liaison Chiefs to respond to incidents. The activation plan has been modified and each fire district has been asked to set up a notification plan for these chiefs once a phone call has been received from the Communications staff at the Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency (MEMA) of a Special Operations activation.

The activation manual has been streamlined and updated for use by the Communications staff at the MEMA. DFS has had tremendous cooperation from the staff at MEMA and looks forward to continuing the relationship.

Training

Training continues to be a major part of the success of Special Operations. With the addition of the IST and the changes to the ISU, there is a great need to continue training for the operators to be proficient in the operations of the vehicles and the equipment.

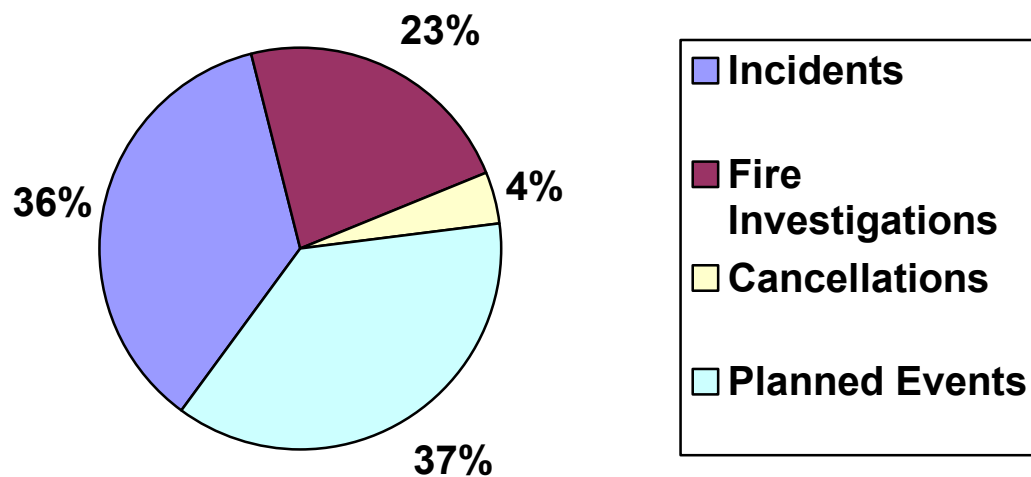
Feedback

A great deal of time has been spent developing not only vehicles with extensive equipment and resources but also, as importantly, a dedicated team committed to the goals of supporting the fire service. The team members strive to meet the local Incident Commander's needs at every incident to which the team responds. As with any new program, a testing and evaluation period is expected to bring out the positives and the negatives. Special Operations does have standard operational procedures that have been built to allow for flexibility at incidents. During the evaluation period areas have been

found that need reevaluation and modifications to some of the operational procedures. As the program continues to expand, evaluation will continue and changes will be made as needed.

Types of Responses

Response has been to a variety of events as reflected in chart below. These incidents have been classified into four categories.



Fire Scenes:

Incident Commanders at both structural and wild land fires have found the services of the Incident Support Unit to be a valuable resource. The one disappointing point to note in reviewing the past year was the delay in the activation of the team and likewise the lateness in arriving on scene. DFS has now seen several communities inquiring of the Incident Commander as to the activation of the ISU at a predetermined alarm as part of their running cards.

Fire Investigations:

The Unit has been called to support investigators from the local fire service and the State Police investigators assigned to the Office of the State Fire Marshal at both fatal fires and serious multiple alarm fires. The most common uses have been for interviews, briefings of all investigation staff, photocopy, video-tape review, phone, pager and fax services.

Searches:

The ISU has responded to one search in the Eastern part of the state and was utilized as a platform for staging incoming response staff from a variety of state and private agencies. The staging was staffed by DFS and State Police staff who worked side by side.

Planned Events:

This past year has seen a tremendous increase in the request and subsequent set up and operation at scheduled events. The ISU was once again used as a unified command post at the Holyoke St Patrick's Day parade for all Public Safety agencies. These agencies included police, fire, local EMS, State Police and parade officials. The Unit was staged at the beginning of the parade and several emergency calls (medicals and security) were controlled from this point. Having all the agencies around one table made for a very smooth operation at the incidents.

The vehicle was also requested and utilized as a unified command post for two major events at the Fitchburg airport. Once again communications were provided for all agencies from security, EMS, fire and law enforcement units to the unified command post.

Support has continued for the Boston Marathon, Head of the Charles Regatta, the City of Cambridge for the Boston Fourth of July Fireworks and Concert as well as many smaller venues.

Types of Support

Some of the types of support provided at responses are as follows:

- Communications (linking of radio frequencies and providing additional portable radios)
- Down linking of State Police Air Wing
- Still and video recording of incident scenes
- Staging area for events
- Platform for Unified Command at events
- Mapping of incident scenes with hourly updating and printing of same

- Obtaining other services and materials needed on scene
- Assisting with formalizing a command structure for short and long term operations
- Providing ICS identification vests
- Cellular phone service
- On scene faxing
- Private, quiet environmentally controlled meeting area for interviews, briefings and planning
- Media coordination and drafting of press releases
- On scene copying and laminating
- Incident documentation

Service to the Communities

At each of these incident responses, Special Operations has been very successful in maintaining its original goal of being a service to communities when needed. The teams have and always will maintain a support role; command and control of incidents remains with the local Incident Commander. The Operations and Liaison Chiefs work with the Incident Commander.

ISU Team

The complement of 56 staff members has proven to work very well within the organizational structure originally designed. Unfortunately during the year Special Operations lost team members who had a great deal of knowledge, enthusiasm and commitment to the program. These members have respectfully stepped down to work on other programs for the fire service. The members have been replaced from the current pool of applications and resumes on file from the original statewide application process in 2000.

Goals for 2004

In the coming year there are several goals that have been set and are outlined below:

- Continue to purchase, install and upgrade equipment as the fire service and technology changes
- Continue to validate and expand databases that are kept on the vehicle for on scene use
- Reconfiguration of response teams and activation procedures
- Continue to meet and exceed the needs and expectations of the fire service through a continuous evaluation of the program
- DFS has been working with the Fire Chiefs' Association of Massachusetts in the design of the "Field Communications Vehicles" that will be distributed in the six hazardous materials response districts in the state sometime in 2004. At the request of the chiefs DFS has provided support in the technical aspect of the vehicles to allow for a smooth transition into the Incident Support Unit or trailer and to ensure that all the equipment is compatible.

Fire Service Support

The importance of the support and commitment DFS has received from the fire service across the Commonwealth in regard to DFS Special Operations cannot be overstated. The success of this program is a tribute to the tremendous cooperation and commitment from departments requesting response and, most importantly, from chiefs and departments having staff who also work as part of the Special Operations group.

The Future

The future of Special Operations continues to grow. The request for services and the upgrade of materials and equipment continue to keep staff busy. DFS has been and will continue to be committed to providing a support service to the fire service of the Commonwealth.

One of the biggest challenges Special Operations faces is the ever-changing technology not only in the vehicles supported by DFS but also in the local communities. Radio frequencies and private line tones change on a weekly basis throughout the fire service. As more money is made available more communities upgrade their radio equipment and in many cases change radio frequencies. DFS would like to encourage communities to notify the Special Operations office at DFS when they are making such changes.

The Special Operations section of the Department of Fire Services web site will be updated on a regular basis with any changes, responses and photos. DFS encourages the fire service to visit the web site not only for news of the Special Ops group but for other news within the agency, changes that affect the fire service, and for information on programs available. You can visit the web site by going to www.mass.gov/dfs.

Contacting Us

To request activation of any of the Special Operations resources 24 hours a day, seven days a week, please call the Communications Office at the Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency at 508-820-2000. A color flyer can be printed and posted from the DFS web site.

For scheduled events or general questions please call the Special Operations Office at the Department of Fire Services at 978-567-3171.